

BENIN PROVINCE.

WP 14775.

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INTELLIGENCE REPORT
ON THE
USONIGBE + USOMEHE VILLAGE GROUP
BENIN DIVISION
BY
MR. J.E. JULL A.D.O
(April 1937)

SUMMARY.

II. HISTORICAL.

2. The people are of the usual Bini stock but have probably intermarried extensively with the neighbouring Kwale tribe. Nothing is known of their alleged founders Enigbe and Emehe. They came in contact with Benin City in the time of the first Oba but were not brought under direct control until about the middle of the sixteenth century. They indulged in numerous skirmishes with their neighbours in the present Asaba and Aboh Divisions.

III. ADMINISTRATIVE.

3. The lowest administrative unit was the village, but each of the three Usonigbe villages is divided into idumu or quarters. The usual Bini age grade organisation is found whereby the adult male population is divided into three agegrades (a) Iloghai (2) Igele (3) Edion, the last named being the elders of the village. The Iloghai and Igele each had a leader appointed on his merits alone.

4. Control of each village was vested in the Edion presided over by the Odionwele, the oldest man, although in the three Usonigbe villages the senior quarter of each village always supplies the Odionwele.

5. There is a class of titled men known as the Okakwo (formerly war captains), but this title can only be taken by a member of the edion grade.

6. The Odionwele announced the decision of the Village Council of edion. The Olotu, a senior member of the Igele age grade, was the chief executive officer. With the approval of the Odionwele, the Olotu gave orders to the two junior age grades.

7. Each of the two village groups, had its Group

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Council which was composed of the councils of the villages in the group, and was presided over by the Okaiwo (leader of the people) who was the senior of the Odionweles in the group. Each Group Council had its recognised central meeting place and met in order to discuss and decided matters of common interest. When any decision was made, the olotus of each village arranged for the execution of the orders in their respective villages.

8. The Usonigbe and Usomehe Group Councils occasionally met at Usonigbe for discussion, usually on the question of war, but such meetings were rare.

9. Both village groups were subject to the Oba of Benin and paid tribute to him. The Oba conveyed his orders to the groups by one of his titled men, the Eraton. This was a non-hereditary title. The Eraton usually lived in Benin City and was the sponsor to the Oba's palace of the village representatives when they journeyed to Benin. The Eraton had no power to interfere in the internal administration of the village groups, but he was entitled to appropriate a portion of the annual tribute paid by the villages.

10. In 1916 the District Head system was commenced and a District Head lived first at Usomehe, and later at Usonigbe. This system was never popular and in 1934 the District Head was finally withdrawn.

11. The present Native Authority is the Oba of Benin. It is recommended that the Odionwele in Council be recognised as the Village Authority, the Council being the Edion (including the Okakwo). It is further recommended that the Okaiwo in Council be recognised as the Village Group Authority. When the Oba's Council is re-organised it will be proposed that the Village Group Councils shall send representatives thereto.

12. In Usonigbe the taxation unit is at present the quarter (idumu), and at Usomehe (where there are no quarters) the unit is the village.

IV. JUDICIAL.

13. The judiciary was vested in the Village Councils presided over by the Odionwele and trials were held in public.

14. The first Native Court was established at Usomehe in 1915 with jurisdiction over a large number of neighbouring

units. In 1921 these were decreased and the Court moved to Usonigbe. At present it has jurisdiction over Ughu Clan as well as over the two groups. Appeal lies to the Oba's Court and District Officer.

1875. The first year of the war was a year of
great suffering and distress. The people were
deprived of their homes and their property.
The government was unable to pay its debts.
The country was in a state of anarchy.

INTELLIGENCE REPORT

On The

USONIGBE AND USOMEHE VILLAGE GROUPS.

BY MR J.E.JULL A.D.O. (April 1937)

1. INTRODUCTORY.

These two kindred village groups -the former consisting of three, the latter of two villages-lie within six miles of one another in the north-eastern part of the Usonigbe District -an administrative area situated in the extreme south-east corner of the Benin Division. The inhabitants, who are of the same basic stock which is to be found throughout the Benin Division, speak a similar dialect of the Bini language and have indentical customs, while the political structure of each group corresponds exactly with that of the other. In pregovernment days, neither group was politically subordinate to the other, but they were associated in a partnership in which the Usonigbe Village Group, being by far the larger of the two, occupied a position of decided preponderance.

2. The people are on the whole darker and taller than the average Bini - probably a result of their frequent intermarriage with women from the neighbouring Kwale villages - and they have from the same source incorporated in their dialect a number of Kwale words. The customary dress of the older men is a cloth worn after the manner of a skirt and gathered in folds round the waist; above the waist they wear nothing but a necklace of coral beads. The majority of the younger men have adopted "shorts" and singlets as their usual wear, but many still adhere to the long cloth wrapped round the body with one end thrown over the left shoulder - the traditional garb of "ordinary men".

3. Their houses are rectangular mud erections with roofs of bamboo-mats, though an occasional corrugated iron roof may be seen at Usonigbe. The three villages which constitute Usonigbe are so closely clustered together that a stranger could not tell where one village ended and the next began; the two villages of Usomehe are separated from one another by about a quarter of a mile .

4. The bulk of the people are farmers but there are at Usonigbe a number of petty shop-keepers and traders in cloths and other articles of European manufacture. There are a few traders in palm-kernels also, and a number of local carpenters who do a brisk trade. Many of the younger men find employment as labourers on the local roads and in the neighbouring timber concessions. A little pottery is made by the women.

5. The people of both village groups are strong supporters of the cult of the Olokun juju and Christianity has made comparatively little headway in this area. There are two schools at Usonigbe, one belonging to the Church Missionary Society, the other to the Roman Catholic Mission; there is no school at Usomehe. The Christian and educated element is therefore small and though there are a number of intelligent and enterprising youths, especially at Usonigbe, they are quite content to leave the management of affairs to their elders.

6. To the east and south-east of the Usonigbe Village Group are nine fairly large farming settlements founded by natives of the Usonigbe Villages but populated mainly by immigrant settlers from the neighbouring Aboha Division. There are no other "strangers" settlements.

8. The following local terms are used in the Report.

Odion	(pl. Edion)	Elder
Odionwele	(pl: Edionwele)	Senior Elder
Okaiwo		Oldest Odionwele.

11. GEOGRAPHICAL.

10. The country slopes south-eastwards from the centre of the Benin Division towards the River Ethiope and is heavily timbered. The only other river in the area, besides the Ethiope, is the Oroghodo which flows southwards from the Agbor District two miles to the west of the Usomehe villages, and even this stream dries up in the height of the dry season.

12. The territory of these two groups covers an area of approximately 180 square miles and has an estimated population of 6840. The density of population is therefore about 38 to the square mile.

III. HISTORICAL.

13. The prefix "Uso" - or, to use the local dialect form "Urho" - is said to mean "town" or "place" and both village groups derive their name from their respective founders, Enigbe and Emehe of whom nothing further is known. The people of this area were first brought into contact with the power of Benin by the visit of "Ogiso n'Uhe", "the king from Ife" who is presumed to be one of the earliest Obas of Benin but it was not until about the middle of the sixteenth century that Bini control was finally established over this area by the Oba Ehengbuda who left a small Bini garrison behind at Adesogbe village in Usomehe. There is nothing further to record but a succession of border skirmishes with the Ikas of the Agbor District, and the Ibos of the neighbouring Asaba and Aboh Divisions.

14. History under British Rule. No resistance was offered to the establishment of British control in this area after 1897. Both groups were administered directly by political officers from Benin City until the foundation of the Benin Native Administration in 1914. In 1916 the District Head system was introduced and Usomehe became the administrative headquarters of the newly-formed Usonigbe District which comprised in its area not only the two village groups under report, but also the villages of the neighbouring Ughu Clan to the south and west and a large area to the north-west now known as the Ugboko District. In 1921, after the formation of the Ugboko District, the Native Court for the area, which had been established at Usomehe since 1915, was removed to Usonigbe. Usomehe remained the administrative headquarters of this diminished area until 1927 when the District Head removed his residence to Usonigbe which then became the administrative as well as the judicial headquarters of the Usonigbe District within its present limits.

15. Direct taxation was first introduced in 1919. The rate enforced was two shillings per adult, male and female, while youths and girls, not quite old enough to be considered adults, paid one shilling each. In 1928 a flat rate of seven shillings per adult male was substituted, with increased rates for certain occupations. In 1933 the flat rate was reduced to six shillings with proportionate reductions in the occupational rates.

IV. ADMINISTRATIVE.

16. Description of Ancient System:- The lowest administrative unit was the village, but each of the three Usonigbe villages, which are of considerable size, is divided into "Idumu" or quarters and amongst these the quarter inhabited by the descendants of the traditional founder of the villages enjoys a position of primacy which, as will be shown later, has an influence on the village administrative organisation.

17. The pregovernment system of village administration rested on the organisation of the adult male population into three "otu" or age-grades, known as (1) Iloghai

(2) Igele
(3) Edion.

18. The Iloghai age-grade consisted of all the youths of the village between the ages of fifteen and thirty. Their duties were to perform all the communal work of the village such as cleaning the streets and farm paths and carrying the annual tribute to the Oba.

This age-grade was directed in the performance of its duties by a leader or "Okai" known as the Okailoghais, who was a senior member of this age-grade appointed to this position for his ability.

19. The Igele age-grade consisted of all the men of the village between the ages of thirty and forty-five. The chief duty of the age-grade was to act as the police and fighting force of the village; it was also held responsible for collecting the annual tribute to be carried into Benin City by the Iloghais and for the repair of the public buildings of the village. Its activities were directed by one of the its older members known as the Okaigele. Like the Okailoghais he was appointed for his ability and not on grounds of seniority.

20. About the age of forty-five an Igele passed into the Edion age-grade which thus consisted of all the older men of the village under the presidency of a person known as the Odionwele. In the two Usomehe villages which are not divided into quarters, the Odionwele was the oldest member of the Edion age-grade; in the Usonigbe villages, he was always the oldest elder from the senior quarter. Thus in Idumeka village the Odionwele always come from Idumeka quarter; in Idumogo from Idumugha quarter and in Idumehen from an extended family which has no collective name but consists of the three quarters of Isonokwa, Idumokorho and Idumumugbo.

21. There was also a class of titled men known as the Okakwo. This title was obtained by purchase from the Edion and could be held only by a member of the Edion age-grade. The Okakwo were originally the village war-captains but they ceased to act in that capacity two or three centuries ago and the title is now purely honorary, securing to its holder a position of dignity second to that of the Odionwele but conferring no actual increase in power. The number of Okakwo was originally limited to three for each village but this restriction was abolished in the time of the Oba Adolor (about 1860) and there are now nine Okakwo in Idumogo, five in Idumeka and one in Idumehen in the Usonigbe Village Group, and one in each of the Usomehe villages.

22. In each village the Odionwele was the Village Head and the administrative authority for the village was the Odionwele in Council with the village meeting of Edion, including the Okakwo. This meeting was always held in the senior quarter of the village in a building known as the Ogwa Edion (Porch of the Edion); members of the Iloghais and Igele age-grades were accustomed to attend but only as listeners. The decisions of this meeting were announced by

the Odionwele who alone was entitled to give the necessary instructions for their execution.

23. The chief executive officer of the village meeting was a senior member of the Igele age-grade known as the Olotu. Like the Okailoghai and Okaigele, the Olotu was chosen primarily for his ability but it was necessary for him first to canvass the Edion for their approval of his appointment, and when this was obtained, to provide them with offerings of yams, palm wine etc. Subject to the authority of the Odionwele, he was in charge of the Iloghai and Igele age-grades, and the Okailoghai and Okaigele took their orders from him; he was assisted by three members of the Igele age-grade selected by himself and known as "Okayobo" or helpers". The Olotu acted as chief of police and led the village contingent of soldiers in war; he was responsible for the collection by the Igele of the annual tribute due to the Oba and accompanied the Iloghai when they carried it in to Benin City. At the village meeting he sat outside the Ogwa Edion to the right-hand side waiting to receive the instructions of the Odionwele. He was not a member of the village meeting himself and had to resign his post when he passed into the Edion age-grade.

24. The administrative authority for each of the two village groups was a joint meeting of the councils of the component villages presided over by the oldest village Odionwele of the group, who was called the Okaiwo or "leader of the people". This meeting was held, both in Usonigbe and Usomehe at a central meeting place called the Ogwa Ilo (Common Porch) and could be attended by all members of the community. The three village Olotu sat, as at the village meetings, to the right-hand of the assembly of Edion and instructions were issued by the Okaiwo to the head Olotu of the group, in the first instance, and by him to the Olotu of the other villages - or at Usomehe, the other village - whereupon each Olotu proceeded to arrange for the execution of these orders in his respective village. The head Olotu was the chief of police for the village group and commander-in-chief in war. Seniority as between the village Odionwele and the village Olotu went by age, and age alone.

25. The Usonigbe and the Usomehe village group councils met occasionally at the Ogwa Ilo of Usonigbe to decide on a joint policy where their common interests were concerned. Such joint meetings were, however, of rare occurrence and were usually convened to concert measures for defence or offence against the neighbouring Ikas, or Kwales.

26. Both groups served the Oba through the same titled man at Benin City, the Eraton, who acted as their sponsor in the palace and their representative to the Oba. Payment of the annual tribute was made through him and he was entitled to reserve a part of this tribute for himself; deputations from the Usonigbe and Usomehe village group councils were generally headed by the head Olotu of the group and always introduced into the Oba's presence by the Eraton. Similarly instructions from the Oba were conveyed to the Okaiwo by the Eraton. On his rare visits to Usonigbe and Usomehe, the Eraton was always met with offerings of yams bush-meat etc. as a sign of respect. The elders were emphatic that the Eraton could not interfere in the internal administration of their communities except upon the express instructions of the Oba. The title of Eraton was non-hereditary and was held sometimes by a titled man of Benin City (Eghaivbo n'^{ore}ogbe) ., sometimes by an official of the royal household (Eghaivbo n'ogbe).

27. There were no women's societies in any of these villages. The shrine of the Olokun juju in both groups wasé, however, tended by a high priestess called the Iyashere, whose duty it was to ensure for the community the protection and favour of this spirit; she had no other function. The Iyashere was always one of the oldest women of the community and obtained the position by purchase from the Edion.

28. Under British Rule. There has been no change in the internal administration of the villages or village groups since the coming of Government up to the present day. From 1897 until 1914 Government, as represented by the District Officer, Benin, was considered as having taken the place of the Oba; after the restoration of the Obaship in 1914 and the establishment of the District Head system two years later, Usomehe became the residence of the local District Head, and he, in the eyes of the people, filled the place of the Eraton as the intermediary between them and the Oba. In 1927 the District Head moved his headquarters to Usonigbe.

29. The District Head system was never popular with the people of either of these two groups. The last District Head for this area was withdrawn in December, 1934 in consequence of repeated complaints by the people of the Usonigbe villages and was reinstated only a few months before the final abolition of the District Head system in the middle of 1936.

30. The Oba is the Native Authority for the whole Division and is assisted by a Council which, consisting at its first establishment in 1914, of nine of the most important chiefs of Benin City, is at the moment composed of the six hereditary titled Bini nobles known as the Uzama, sixteen non-hereditary titled men of Benin City known as the Egaivbo n'ore, and twenty-

seven non-hereditary titled officials of the royal household known as the Eghaivbo n'ogbe.

32. The flat rate of tax has, since 1933, been six shillings per adult male with increased rates for certain occupations. In addition to this amount, each adult male "stranger" provided he does not pay one of the occupational rates - is liable for an annual Residential Rent of five shillings, and, if he is a farmer, for an annual Farming Rent of ten shillings. "Strangers" who collect palm-produce have to pay in addition to the flat rate of six shillings and the Residential Rent of five shillings, and annual palm-product Permit Fee of eight shillings, which amount is increased to £1 in the case of the head-man of a group of such palm-produce collectors.

Proposals for the future.

33. Survivals. The pregovernment system of administration has survived absolutely intact with the single exception that the Eraton no longer functions as the intermediary between these two village groups and the central authority of the Oba, who now communicates with the village and village group heads direct. The younger men carry on with their farming and trading and are quite content to leave the management of affairs to their elders whose authority remains undiminished.

V. Judicial.

42. The lowest unit in the judicial organisation was the village and in each village the village meeting held at the Ogwa Edion under the presidency of the village Odionwele exactly as described in the Administrative section of this Report acted also as the village judicial authority. The Olotu and his Okayobo acted as messengers of court summoning parties to appear before the village meeting, arresting criminals and enforcing the payment of fines. They were assisted by the Okaigele and other members of the Igele age-grade when necessary.

43. Disputes between members of different villages - even when one party came from Usonigbe and the other from Usomehe - were heard as a rule in the village of the complainant; Edion from the village of the defendant or accused were entitled to attend the trial and to sit with the Edion of the complainants village. Disputes between an Usonigbe or Usomehe man and a party from one of the neighbouring villages of Ewosi or Umughumu n'Uzuagoor were always heard in the latter villages as the heads of these two villages were hereditary chieftains and occupied a position of greater prestige than the Okaiwo of either Usonigbe or Usomehe.

44. The Oba was the supreme arbiter in all disputes. In theory any person could appeal to him; in practice the distance and expense of the journey to Benin City precluded the exercise of this right. The Eraton was also accustomed to settle disputes brought before him on his occasional visits, and as a rule, the only cases taken to the Oba were disputes over land between communities.

45. The penalties for the various offences were as follows:-

Murder:- The murderer was sent to the Oba for execution.

Manslaughter:- The guilty man was sent to the Oba with a report of the circumstances. If the killing was purely accidental and the accused had not been culpably negligent when it was a shooting accident, he was sometimes set free.

Arson: The incendiary was banished from the territory of the village group.

Larceny: The thief was fined one goat and ordered to restore the stolen property or its equivalent value.

Assault:- Assault with wounding or an assault by an Igele or Iloghai upon an elder was punished by a fine of one goat. Ordinary assault was not regarded as a criminal offence.

Adultery:- The aggrieved husband could avenge himself on the adulterer by seizing as much of his property as he could lay hands on. As rule, the adulterer to avoid this begged the village council to effect a reconciliation; he was then ordered to provide one goat for sacrifice to the Edion juju and to render the husband compensation of one goat or a bag of cowries.

Insubordination on the part of an Iloghai or Igele was punished by a fine of a hundred yams.

46. All fines were divided amongst the Edion, a share being allotted to the Olotu for his services.

47. Under British Rule. There was no local judicial authority for this area until the establishment in 1915 at Usomehe of a Native Court with jurisdiction over the area that was in 1916 constituted the Usonigbe District.

When in 1921 the present Ugboko District was carved out of the western half of the old Usonigbe District, this Court was removed to Usonigbe and its jurisdiction restricted to the territories of the Usonigbe and Usomehe Village groups and of the adjoining Ughu Clan. There has been no further change since then.

48. The Usonigbe Native Court consisted of an average of nine members of whom two came from the Usonigbe villages, one from one of the Usomehe villages and the rest from the villages of the neighbouring Ughu Clan. The members from the Usonigbe and Usomehe villages were always Edion and, generally, Okakwo, nominated to the position by the village group councils. The Usonigbe Native Court at the moment exercises "C" grade powers and is subject to the appellate jurisdiction of the Oba's Court, which consists of four Bini chiefs under the vice-presidency of the Iyashere.

Proposals for the Future.

49. Survivals. The village councils still meet to decide minor disputes between members of their villages, but they do not attempt to do more than arbitrate. It can be said that the ancient judicial system has given way before the Native Court system and that the village and village group meetings have ceased to function except as arbitratory bodies.

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— MAP OF —

— USONIGBE AND USOMENE —

— VILLAGE GROUPS —

— Scale 4 MILES = 1 inch —



